

National Center for Experiments in Television at KQED-TV 1967-1975
Steve Seid and Maria Troy

Excerpt from letter from Steve Seid, Video Curator of the Pacific Film Archives and Maria Troy, Associate Curator of the Wexner Center, June 17, 2000, describing NCET at KQED

This fall, after two years of sleuthing and preservation, Pacific Film Archive will be exhibiting the videoworks of the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET). This exhibition will include three to four evening screenings and a gallery exhibition centered around the 1973 installation The Videola.

The NCET was an artists' research facility tenuously aligned with San Francisco's public station, KQED. The videoworks to be presented at PFA cover the primary thrusts of the Center, cross-disciplinary performance-oriented video, and image processing, and span the Center's lifetime--1967 to 1975. Pacific Film Archive is going to make these pioneering works available as a group of assembled compilations, beginning in the late fall of this year. [2000]

The National Center for Experiments in Television was the first of the so-called TV labs. In its earliest conception, the NCET was really the Experimental TV Project, housed at KQED and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation. This was 1967. The driving theory behind the Experimental TV Project was to provide equipment access (an absolute rarity in those days) to a cross-disciplinary group of artists who would explore new modes of expression, simultaneously developing alternative visual languages. Under the guidance of director Brice Howard, a groundbreaking body of works was completed that redirected video technology toward unconventional experimentation. Works such as William Stewart Jones' Graham Tape Delay, Richard Felciano's Linearity and Joanne Kyger's Descartes exemplified the preoccupation with performative disciplines and image processing. This culminated in the 90-minute production of !Heimskringla!, a videotape combining the talents of the La Mama Theater, director Tom O'Horgan, and the NCET crew.

In 1969, the Experimental TV Project was renamed the National Center for Experiments in Television, and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. A new group of resident artists was brought in which included Stephen Beck, Willard Rosenquist, Warner Jepson, William Gwin, Don Hallock and William Roarty. Works such as Beck's Cosmic Portal, Rosenquist's Light Forms, Hallock's TheFather Tapes and Roarty's Untitled were completed during this period. The need to expand the image processing possibilities in the NCET studio was solved by the designation of two "circuit engineers," Stephen Beck who built his Direct Video Synthesizer, and Lawrence Templeton who built the "mix" station. Another principal concern of the NCET is seen in the Videospace Electronic Notebooks, a series of vaguely didactic programs that contextualized the Center's philosophy of experimentation.

***A medium is available. A very sophisticated, complex technology which human beings invested is available to us. It is dumb, inarticulate, contains no magic. It is available and manageable and probably stunningly beautiful when managed by graceful people who are bent on acts of expression ... This newer medium is swift in nature. It demands a new kind of perception. It moves like light sparked into life as through a nervous prism. It is another paint, another dance, another music of sound. Another message meant to catch the quick vision of the inner eye.

- Brice Howard, Videospace, 1972

The National Center for Experiments in Television's greatest asset was probably also cause for its demise-the

mandate to innovate without end, nor end-product. Unlike other TV labs where the culmination of a residency might lead to programming, the NCET residents had no specific prerequisite. This led to an estrangement with KQED in which the Center abandoned the station and its studio facilities, concentrating now on smaller format technologies. The works from the later period tend to be more painterly and time-based as their video synthesis, feedback, and keying resources expanded.

Dating from 1967 to 1975, the videoworks from the NCET offer an unusual glimpse of some of the earliest efforts to turn television technologies toward other ends. Often this end meant the simple joy of an electronic surface that evolved as so many discrete paintings; at other times, this meant rendering other art forms-poetry, dance, music, painting-as recombinant expressions within what Brice Howard called "videospace." These tapes also allow us to observe not just the creative output of individuals, but the concerted labors of an institution to rally and promote a new form of television.

By early summer, Pacific Film Archive will have made the decisions regarding what tapes will be exhibited and how they will be juxtaposed within the general sweep of the NCET. Preview copies of some of the works should be available soon thereafter. A small catalogue with program notes and essays detailing the NCET's aesthetic and technical departures should be completed by late fall.